Dating in Later Life: Do the Benefits of Age Depend on the Relational Context?

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Abstract

Dating in later life is increasingly prevalent, yet research on older adults' experiences within their newly-formed relationships is scarce. Although older adults are often more adept in minimizing their reactivity when relational tensions arise, integrating insights from theories of aging and relationship development suggests that older adults' advantage over younger adults may diminish, or even reverse, when examining reactivity in newly-formed dating relationships. Married and dating couples ($N = 282$; aged 30-88) completed a 21-day daily diary task. Multi-level modeling was used to estimate individuals' negative affect, physical health symptoms, and relationship satisfaction on days of greater tension with a partner. Age was not associated with reactivity among married couples. Among dating couples, age was associated with emotional reactivity (women only) and physical reactivity, but not relational reactivity, such that older individuals experienced greater increases in emotional distress and physical health problems on higher tension days compared to younger individuals.

Keywords: AGING, REACTIVITY, RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT, INTERPERSONAL TENSIONS, WELL-BEING

Dating in Later Life: Do the Advantages of Age Depend on the Relational Context?

Even in the best romantic relationships, partners are bound to experience moments when they annoy one another, hurt each other's feelings, or let each other down in some way (Rusbult & VanLange, 2003). When it comes to managing those occasional minor relationship tensions, scientific evidence corroborates the conventional wisdom that partners should 'learn to pick their battles' and try to 'not sweat the small stuff' (McNulty, 2010). Although heeding this wisdom is not always easy (Rusbult & VanLange, 2003), theories of age-related changes in emotion regulation suggest that as individuals grow older, they become more adept at enacting such benevolent responses to relational negativity (Charles & Carstensen, 2009). Specifically, due to the changing motivational priorities and socioemotional expertise that come with age, older adults are often more skilled than their younger counterparts in minimizing their reactivity to tense situations (Birditt et al., 2005, 2020; Neupert et al., 2007), giving older adults an important advantage in defusing relationship disputes (Story et al., 2007; Verstaen et al., 2020).

However, not all romantic relationships may function better with age. To date, studies considering age differences in responses to tensions within romantic relationships have exclusively examined older couples in longstanding marriages (e.g., 20+ years; Story et al., 2007; Verstaen et al., 2020). As this focus confounds age with relationship duration, lingering questions remain regarding whether the benefits of age may generalize to newer dating relationships. That is, are age-related gains in emotion regulation sufficient to ensure older adults' advantage over younger adults within relationships in which partners do not share a long history together? Answering this question would address a notable limitation in the literature as approximately 30% of adults over age 50 in the United States are unmarried (Pew Research Center, 2020) and the number of older adults who indicate they are in a dating relationship has

risen dramatically over recent decades (Brown & Shinohara, 2013; Carr & Utz, 2020). Yet, despite these trends, research on dating in later life is scarce. To this end, the current study examined whether older is always wiser when navigating relational tensions by comparing older and younger couples in both established marriages and newer dating relationships. Integrating insights from theories of aging and theories of relationship development suggests that the advantages of age may depend on the relational context. Although older adults may be more skilled in minimizing the effects of tensions within long-term established marriages, older adults' advantage over younger adults may diminish, and perhaps even reverse, when examining responses to relationship tensions in newer dating relationships.

The Benefits of Age: Theories of Socioemotional Expertise

According to theories of age-related changes in emotion regulation, chronological age serves as a marker for the passage of time (Charles & Carstensen, 2009). Importantly, "time lived" operates as a key mechanism through which individuals gain the motivation and expertise necessary for successfully regulating their responses to interpersonal tensions (Charles, 2010). Aging is frequently associated with a shift in motivational priorities, such that older adults are more likely than younger adults to focus on the maintenance of harmonious interpersonal relationships over other goals (Carstensen, 2006). Moreover, accrued life experiences allow individuals to amass a wider array of emotion regulation strategies and learn how to use these strategies more effectively (Blanchard-Fields, 2007). Together, these age-related changes should render older adults more skilled than younger adults in minimizing their distress when faced with tense situations within their relationship.

In fact, a wealth of research indicates that while older and younger adults do not necessarily differ in the frequency of tensions experienced within their closest ties (e.g., spouse,

best friend; Birditt et al., 2009), older adults typically experience less intense emotional reactions to those tensions when they occur (Birditt et al., 2020). On days when their social partners behave negatively, older adults find those interactions to be less stressful and report experiencing fewer negative emotions, such as anger, than do younger adults (Birditt et al., 2005; Neupert et al., 2007). This tendency to exhibit lower reactivity to everyday tensions seems to be facilitated by the fact that older adults exhibit a stronger preference for defusing tense situations with passive coping strategies, such as shifting the conversation, doing nothing/letting the issue go, or reappraising the situation to give the partner the benefit of the doubt for their actions, whereas younger adults are more likely to respond with direct confrontation and blaming (Birditt et al., 2005; Blanchard-Fields & Coats, 2008; Charles et al., 2009). Moreover, older adults seem to benefit more when using these types of passive strategies compared to younger adults (Blanchard-Fields & Coats, 2008; Charles et al., 2009). That is, although older adults experience less emotional and physiological distress during unpleasant interactions if they engage in strategies to avoid direct confrontation, younger adults' reactivity is not necessarily dampened when using those same strategies (Holley et al., 2013; Luong & Charles, 2014). Overall, then, these findings suggest that older adults may more successfully regulate their emotional responses to difficulties within their newly-formed romantic relationships compared to younger adults.

The Unique Case of Older Adults in Newly-formed Relationships

The generalizability of these age benefits to the context of newly-formed romantic relationships, however, is questionable in light of research suggesting that preserving harmony and minimizing negative emotions may prove especially challenging in the early stages of relationship development. According to the relationship turbulence model (Knobloch, 2007; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004), couples typically experience escalations in relationship difficulties

as they transition into a committed dating relationship. Notably, this rise in tensions is considered an inevitable by-product of increasing interdependence between partners. During the early stages of a serious dating relationship when partners become more involved in each other's daily lives, they must learn how to effectively coordinate their everyday activities and work toward more cooperative relationship functioning. Because smooth interdependence takes time and practice to build, initial efforts at integrating lives can be more turbulent than harmonious. In fact, when asked to reflect on their relationship history, newlyweds recall experiencing more tensions during the initial phases of the seriously dating stage compared to the later stages of their courtship (Braiker & Kelley, 1979).

Unfortunately, this phase of relationship development is also characterized by greater feelings of relational uncertainty and a shorter history of shared positive experiences as a couple, which together can influence responses to those inevitable relationship tensions (Kelly, 1983; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Theiss et al., 2009). Compared to more established couples, who can evaluate any immediate negative interactions within the broader context of their previously accumulated positive relationship experiences, couples in early dating relationships not only are particularly vigilant for signs of potential relational problems (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) but also have had less time build positive reserves within their relationship (Kelly, 1983). Without the perspective that a longer history of shared positive experiences can provide, individuals' ability to effectively ignore or reappraise the significance of relational difficulties is diminished (Feeney & Lemay, 2012; Walsh & Neff, 2020). Indeed, research on dating couples has revealed that individuals' propensity to appraise their partner's irritating behaviors as a more serious problem for the relationship and to report experiencing a variety of negative emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, fear, jealousy) as a result reach an apex at the beginning of a serious dating

relationship (i.e., moderate levels of intimacy; Knobloch, 2007; Knobloch et al., 2007). Put another way, as negative relationship events are often interpreted as particularly meaningful and less likely to be explained away within newer relationships, individuals' reactivity to relationship tensions appears to be exacerbated within this context.

Notably, the consequences of these normative tensions for well-being might be intensified for older adults. Given older adults' stronger desire to avoid negative relational experiences, theories of aging also suggest that in situations where tensions are not easily averted or minimized, the benefits of age may diminish or even reverse (Charles & Piazza, 2009; Skinner et al., 2014). Supporting this perspective, daily diary work indicates that when individuals are unable to avoid arguments with social network members, older adults not only experience the same levels of emotional distress as younger adults (Birditt, 2014; Charles et al., 2009) but also exhibit greater physiological reactivity in response to that emotional distress compared to younger adults (Piazza et al., 2013). Thus, as newly-formed dating relationships are often a context in which tensions are generally more frequent and more difficult to overlook, older adults may be more vulnerable than younger adults to the emotional and physical costs of those early relationship tensions.

Overview of Current Study

Does the life experience that comes with age ensure older adults' advantage over younger adults in responding to relational tensions even within normatively turbulent, newly-formed dating relationships? To address this question, the current study examined the association between age and individuals' reactivity to their partner's daily negative behaviors using 21-day daily diary data collected from couples in either established (i.e., married at least 10 years) or newer relationships (i.e., dating less than three years). Each night of the survey, participants

reported the negative behaviors they received from their partner, their negative affect, physical health symptoms, and relationship satisfaction. Similar to prior work (e.g., Birditt et al., 2005), reactivity was defined as the daily levels of emotional distress, problematic health symptoms, and relationship satisfaction reported on higher versus lower relationship tension days, adjusting for previous day distress, symptoms, and satisfaction. That is, reporting greater increases in emotional distress and physical health symptoms and greater decreases in relationship happiness on days in which one perceives more negative behavior from a partner would indicate greater emotional, physical, and relational reactivity, respectively.

Integrating theories from aging and relationship development, we expected that the effect of age on reactivity would be moderated by relationship type. Consistent with studies examining age differences in emotional and physical responses to interpersonal tensions (Birditt et al., 2005; 2020; Neupert et al., 2007), it was predicted that older adults in established marriages would exhibit lower emotional, physical, and relational reactivity to their partner's daily negative behaviors compared to younger adults in established marriages. However, as navigating relationship tensions can be more difficult within newly-formed relationships (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004), age differences in reactivity may weaken or even reverse within newer dating relationships, such that older adults in newer dating relationships might exhibit greater reactivity to their partner's negative behaviors compared to their younger counterparts.

Although theories of aging argue that age-related changes in emotion regulation are one key factor underlying age differences in responses to relational tensions, older and younger adults may nonetheless differ in other ways that could also contribute to their conflict experiences and reactivity levels. Thus, to examine the robustness of the results, several ancillary analyses were conducted. First, as relationship type (i.e., married versus dating) and retirement

may greatly influence how much time couples spend together on a day-to-day basis and thus influence opportunities for tensions to occur, we examined whether results held when adjusting for time spent interacting with the partner each day. Likewise, some research indicates that couples argue about children more frequently than they do about other topics (Papp et al., 2009). As couples with younger children in the home may encounter more daily situations where disagreements about children could arise, and older couples may be less likely to have children in the home, whether the participant reported having children under the age of 18 living in the home was also included as a covariate. Third, as neuroticism is associated with greater reactivity to interpersonal conflicts (e.g., Bolger & Shilling, 1991) and tends to decline with age (Soto et al., 2011), additional analyses adjusted for the potential effects of neuroticism. Fourth, as couples who are generally less happy in their relationship are more reactive to negative relationship events compared to happier couples (e.g., Jacobson et al., 1982), and both age and relationship duration are associated with general relationship satisfaction (Bühler et al., 2021), models adjusting for participants' general relationship satisfaction were conducted. Finally, we examined whether results held when adjusting for previous divorce, as divorced individuals may be more likely to exhibit poor relationship functioning in future relationships (e.g., Bramlett & Mosher, 2001) and older dating individuals are more likely than younger dating individuals to have a history of divorce. For these ancillary analyses, we conducted models that fully adjusted for all covariates simultaneously, as well as models adjusting for each covariate separately.

Method

Participants

Couples who were either (a) in marriages of at least 10 years in length or (b) in dating relationships of 3 years or less were recruited to participate in a broader study of relationships

across the lifespan through advertisements placed in the community and on social networking websites (e.g., Nextdoor neighborhood groups, Facebook). Recruitment began in July 2015. All couples were required to be between ages 30 and 90 to ensure equivalent age representation across the two relationship types. As most marriages that end in divorce do so within the first decade (Raley & Bumpass, 2003), a minimum criterion of 10 years for the married subsample ensured the assessment of strongly established relationships, while setting a reasonable lower limit for younger couples (e.g., age 30-45). For the dating subsample, converging research indicates that the early years of courtship represent the time in which relationships transition toward becoming more established (Knobloch, 2007). For instance, only after two years of dating do individuals begin to name their partner as the significant attachment figure in their life (Ziefman & Hazan, 2008) and their communal behaviors toward their partner become less effortful to enact (Kammrath et al., 2015). Thus, a focus on the first three years of courtship ensured assessment of the theorized period of relational turbulence. Finally, as older daters tend to be in better health and are more socially connected compared to older unmarried, but non-daters (Brown & Shinohara, 2013), only participants who reported being in average health (i.e., rated their health as the same or better than the health of most people their age; Charles & Carstensen, 2008) and who reported at least moderate levels (e.g., several times a year) of involvement in organized activities, volunteer activities, and/or time with friends and family were eligible to participate (Brown & Shinohara, 2013). These eligibility requirements were implemented to limit potential confounds between health, social involvement, and age-related processes.

Initially, 313 different-gender couples enrolled in the study. However, 18 couples withdrew before completing the background questionnaire and 13 couples withdrew after at least

one member completed the background questionnaire (i.e., before participating in the daily diary task). As most variables of interest were collected as part of the daily surveys, this study utilized data provided from the 282 couples who both provided background information and participated in the daily diary task.

Overall, 78.2% of participants identified as White, 12.7% as Hispanic/Latine, 3.8% as African-American, 2.1% as Asian American, and 2.7% as other. Data were missing for 4 (0.7%) participants. In terms of the highest educational degree received, 15.1% reported having a high school diploma or GED, 11.9% reported an Associate's/vocational degree, 39.3% reported a Bachelor's degree, 25.8% reported a Master's degree and 7.8% reported a PhD, MD, or DDS. Data were missing for 2 (0.4%) participants. Regarding employment, 56.2% indicated they were employed full time, 10.5% were employed part-time, 17.8% were retired, and 15.5% indicated another category (e.g., unemployed, disabled and unable to work, or homemaker). The median household income reported was between $80,000 and $90,000 USD.

The final sample included 200 married couples (70.9%) and 82 couples (29.1%) in dating relationships. On average, married participants were 51.5 years old (*SD* = 12.8; Median = 50.0; Range = 30 - 84) and had been married 25.5 years (*SD* = 12.3; Median = 23.0; Range = 10 – 56 years). Forty-nine percent indicated they had children under the age of 18 living in the home and 15.7% reported a previous divorce. Turning to the dating couples, on average these participants were 44.5 years old (*SD* = 12.7; Median = 41.0; Range = 30 – 88; 32% were over age 50) and reported dating their partner for 12.7 months on average (*SD* = 9.7; Median = 9.0 months; Range = 1 month to 36 months; 85.4% dating for less than two years). Twenty-two percent of dating participants reported having children under the age of 18 living in the home and 48.0% reported a previous divorce.

Procedure

Each participant completed an online background questionnaire prior to attending a laboratory session, where couples completed several additional questionnaires and engaged in a series of videotaped discussions not relevant to the current hypotheses. After the lab session, couples were asked to complete a 21-day daily diary survey. Each evening, participants were sent a unique link to complete the daily survey, which was available between the hours of 7pm and 3am to ensure proper completion of the surveys (e.g., prevent participants from completing two surveys in a single day).[1] Couples were paid a total of $150 for their participation in the study. An overview of the study protocol, which includes all measures administered as part of the larger study, can be found on the OSF page for the project (https://osf.io/d623c/?view_only=e27aeff34fea4678b4d594a0e3be25c1). The measures specifically used in the current study can be found in the supplementary materials.

Participants completed 18.7 (*SD* = 3.6) daily surveys on average, with 96.3% of participants providing at least 7 days of data. Married and dating participants did not differ in the number of daily surveys completed (Men: *M* = 18.5 and 17.5 respectively; $t(280) = 1.60$, $p = .111$; Women: *M* = 19.4 and 18.5 respectively; $t(280) = 1.65$, $p = .101$). Age was not associated with the number of daily surveys completed for men ($r = .10$, $p = .107$), however, older women provided more days of data than did younger women ($r = .15$, $p = .010$). Overall, participants provided a total of 10,519 days of daily data. As data were examined using multilevel modeling techniques, participants who did not provide all 21 days of data could be included in the

[1] One participant elected to complete the daily surveys on paper. This participant was given all 21 diaries along with a set of pre-stamped envelopes and was asked to fill out the appropriate survey each night and drop it in the mail the next morning.

analyses. Thus, all results reported are based on data from all participants who participated in the daily diary task.

Daily Diary Measures

Daily Partner Negative Behaviors

Participants were presented with a checklist of 13 behaviors that their partner may have enacted that day and were asked to indicate whether any of the behaviors had occurred (1 = yes and 0 = no). Seven items comprised the measure of negative behaviors (e.g., "My partner criticized or insulted me, even if they did not mean to", "My partner showed anger or impatience toward me").[2] Composite scores were created by summing these seven items for each individual on each day.

Daily Negative Affect

Participants completed a 14-item measure adapted from the Profile of Mood States for use in diary studies (Cranford et al., 2006). Eleven items assessed participants' negative affect (e.g., sadness, anger, anxiety, loneliness) and three items assessed participants' positive affect (e.g., cheerful, lively, fulfilled). Participants rated the extent to which they experienced each affective state on that day (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely) and average negative and positive affect scores were created for each participant on each day. In line with prior research examining the effects of age on emotional reactivity (e.g., Birditt, 2014; Piazza et al., 2012), the current study focused on daily negative affect. However, results from an additional model considering the effects of age and relationship type on positive emotional reactivity can be found in the supplemental materials (see Table S13).

Daily Physical Health Symptoms

[2] The remaining six items assessed positive, supportive relational behaviors outside the scope of this project (e.g., "My partner provided me with encouragement").

Participants were presented with six items listing physical health symptoms (e.g., Headaches, backaches, or muscle soreness; Nausea, poor appetite, or other digestive problems) and asked to indicate the extent to which they had experienced each health problem that day (1 = I didn't feel this way at all; 7 = I felt this way all the time; Neupert et al., 2007). An average score was created for each individual on each day.

Daily Relationship Satisfaction

Daily relationship satisfaction was assessed using three items from the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm et al., 1986) which were modified for daily use (e.g., "How satisfied were you with your relationship today?"; 1 = very unsatisfied and 7 = very satisfied). An average score was created for each individual on each day.

Time Spent Interacting with Partner

Each day participants estimated how many hours they spent interacting with their partner either in person or on their phone. Participants were instructed to not include time spent sleeping in their estimate. Participants responded to this item on the following 0-5 scale: no time at all, 0-3 hours, 3-6 hours, 6-9 hours, 9-12 hours, and more than 12 hours.

Background Questionnaire Measures

Age and Relationship Type

Participants reported their age, which was treated as a continuous variable in all analyses. Relationship type was coded as 0 = married and 1 = dating.

Emotional Stability/Neuroticism

Participants completed the Ten Item Personality Inventory (Gosling et al., 2003), which includes two items assessing emotional stability. Specifically, participants indicated the extent to which they viewed themselves as 1) anxious/easily upset and 2) calm/emotionally stable (1 =

strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The former item was reversed scored, and the average of the two items calculated for each participant, with higher scores indicating greater levels of emotional stability (i.e., lower neuroticism).

General Relationship Satisfaction

General relationship satisfaction was operationalized using a 10-item version of the Couples' Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007; Williamson et al., 2021). Participants' summed relationship satisfaction scores could range from 0 to 51, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction.

Children in the Home and Divorce History

Participants reported whether they had children under the age of 18 living in the home (1 = yes, 0 = no). Participants also reported whether they had experienced a divorce prior to their current relationship (1 = yes, 0 = no).

Analytical Strategy

The hypotheses and analytic plan were pre-registered as a subset of the aims of the larger funding proposal (https://osf.io/wkxtj?view_only=0b0913c6a9b54a8785e737681e2e4731). Multilevel modeling analyses were conducted using Hierarchical Linear Modeling v. 7.03 (Raudenbush et al., 2013). Interdependence within couples was accounted for in all analyses using procedures described by Laurenceau and Bolger (2005) for analyzing longitudinal, dyadic data. Specifically, separate effects for male and female partners were estimated simultaneously and separately using a dual-intercept approach. The covariance matrix of the residuals was structured such that same-day correlations allowed for residuals within each couple and cross-day correlations with a first-order autoregressive pattern allowed for residuals within each person, accounting for dependency within couples and across days (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013).

This approach allows for straightforward tests of gender differences in coefficients of interest (a 1-*df* χ^2 test). When no significant gender differences were found, we constrained the coefficients to be equal for men and women and results are presented pooled across gender, as the significance test of such a constrained coefficient is more powerful than tests for gender-specific coefficients (Barnett et al., 1993).

An index of reactivity was derived by modeling the within-person association between daily partner negative behaviors and daily outcomes (i.e., negative affect, physical symptoms, or relationship satisfaction) adjusting for the previous day daily outcome across the 21 diary days. The inclusion of previous day negative affect, physical symptoms, and relationship satisfaction was not originally pre-registered; however, this adjustment represents a more stringent examination of individuals' reactivity as it allows for the examination of whether daily relationship tensions are associated with changes in these outcomes from previous day levels. Separate models were run for each outcome.

Level 1: Individual's Daily Outcome (i.e., negative affect, physical health symptoms, or relationship satisfaction) = Female [b_{0j} + b_{1j} (diary day) + b_{2j} (previous day outcome) + b_{3j} (perceived negative behavior from partner)] + Male [b_{4j} + b_{5j} (diary day) + b_{6j} (previous day outcome) + b_{7j} (perceived negative behavior from partner) + e_{ijk}

Level 2: $b_0 = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}$(female average perceived negative behavior from partner across all days) + γ_{02}(female age) + γ_{03}(female relationship type) + γ_{04}(age X relationship type) + r_0

$b_1 = \gamma_{10}$

$b_2 = \gamma_{20} + r_2$

$b_3 = \gamma_{30} + \gamma_{31}$(female age) + γ_{32}(female relationship type) + γ_{33}(age X relationship type) + r_3

$b_4 = \gamma_{40} + \gamma_{41}$(male average perceived negative behavior from partner across all days) + γ_{42}(male age) + γ_{43}(male relationship type) + γ_{44}(age X relationship type) + r_4

$b_5 = \gamma_{50}$

$b_6 = \gamma_{60} + r_6$

$b_7 = \gamma_{70} + \gamma_{71}$(male age) + γ_{72}(male relationship type) + γ_{73}(age X relationship type) + r_7

As seen in this model, the within-person level of the analysis (Level 1) estimated each individual's daily outcome (i.e., negative affect, physical health symptoms, or relationship satisfaction) as a function of their previous day outcome level and their same day perceptions of their partner's negative behavior, both of which were centered within-persons. The model adjusted for diary day to account for temporal effects of participating in a daily diary design (e.g., Shrout et al., 2018). Individuals' average perceptions of their partner's negative behavior across the diary days were grand mean centered and included in the between-subjects level of the analysis (Level 2) in order to fully disentangle the within-person and between-person effects of perceived negative behaviors on the outcome (Curran & Bauer, 2011). In other words, adjusting for average perceived negative behaviors allowed us to examine whether fluctuations in relationship tensions were associated with corresponding changes in individuals' negative affect, physical health symptoms, or relationship satisfaction while taking into account the fact that some individuals generally reported receiving more negative behaviors from their partners than did others. Age (grand-mean centered), relationship type (married or dating), and their

interaction were entered at the between-persons level of the analysis to predict the intercept (b_0 and b_4) as well as the reactivity coefficient (b_3 and b_7) for females and males.

Sensitivity analyses using parameters from our models (e.g., coefficients, means, variances, and effect sizes; Lane & Hennes, 2018) indicated that a replication of this study using the same sample size (both between and within) would be well-powered to detect all effects of interest for both men and women when examining emotional and physical reactivity (i.e., power ranged from .99 to 1). For relational reactivity, a replication of this study using the same sample size (both between and within) would be well-powered to detect reactivity effects for both men and women as well as the moderation of reactivity by age and relationship type for women (i.e., power ranged from .99 to 1). Power for detecting this moderation effect for men, however, is somewhat lower (power = .736).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for key study variables are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Overall, married and dating men reported that their partner engaged in at least one negative behavior on 22.5% and 22.8% of diary days, respectively. Married and dating women perceived at least one negative behavior from their partner on 25.9% and 26.5% of diary days, respectively. The median amount of time spent interacting with a partner each day was 3-6 hours for both married and dating participants. Married participants reporting spending no time at all together on 1.7% of days, and dating participants reported spending no time at all together on 5.3% of days.

Are Age and Relationship Type Associated with Reactivity to a Partner's Negative Behaviors?

The overarching goal of the study was to examine whether the effect of age on individuals' reactivity to their partner's daily negative behaviors may differ within established marriages and newer dating relationships, such that the typical benefits of age may be weakened or reversed within less established, newer relationships.

Results for Emotional Reactivity

As seen in Table 3, the results for negative affect revealed that both women (b = .30, p < .001) and men (b = .29, p < .001) exhibited significant reactivity on average, such that they reported greater increases in negative affect on days in which they perceived more negative behaviors from their partner compared to days when they reported fewer negative partner behaviors. Although neither age (b = .001, p = .634), relationship type (b = .019, p = .676), nor their interaction (b = -.004, p = .312) moderated this reactivity for men, the interaction between age and relationship type did significantly moderate reactivity for women (b = .008, p = .032). This gender difference was significant (χ^2 = 6.10, p = .013). Further analyses revealed that this moderating effect for women remained significant (all ps $\leq$ .039) when simultaneously adjusting for daily time spent interacting with the partner, emotional stability, general relationship satisfaction, the presence of children in the home, and divorce history, as well as when adjusting for each covariate separately (see Tables S1-S6 in the Supplemental Materials).

As shown in Figure 1, the overall pattern of results for women was partially consistent with predictions. Contrary to our expectation that older married individuals may experience less emotional distress in response to relational tensions compared to younger married individuals, simple slope analyses revealed that age was not significantly associated with reactivity among married women (indicated by the dotted line; b = .001, SE = .002, t(278) = 0.370, p = .712, 95% CI [-.003, .005]). As expected, however, age was significantly associated with reactivity among

dating women, such that older women experienced greater increases in negative affect on days in which they reported receiving more negativity from their partner compared to younger women (indicated by the solid line; b = .009, SE = .003, t(278) = 3.09, p = .002, 95% CI [.003, .015]). Additional analyses confirmed that older dating women also were more reactive to their partner's negative behaviors compared to older married women (Age 70: b = .219, SE = .103, t(278) = 2.117, p = .035, 95% CI [.016, .421]). Younger and middle aged dating women, however, did not differ from their younger and middle aged married counterparts in their reactivity to their partner's negative behavior (Age 30: b = -.100, SE = .069, t(278) = -1.440, p = .151, 95% CI [-.236, .036]; Age 50: b = .050, SE = .046, t(278) = 1.073, p = .284, 95% CI [-.041, .141]). Thus, although age was not associated with greater emotional resilience to a partner's negative behaviors among married women as expected, evidence did suggest that older dating women were particularly vulnerable to experiencing emotional distress when faced with tensions within their relationship.

Results for Physical Reactivity

Table 4 presents the results for the model using physical health symptoms as the daily outcome. As no significant gender differences emerged, results are presented pooled across gender. On average, individuals exhibited significant reactivity (b = .046, $p < .001$), such that they reported experiencing increased physical health problems on days in which they perceived more negative behaviors from their partner compared to days when they reported fewer negative partner behaviors. Moreover, the interaction between age and relationship type significantly moderated this physical reactivity (b = .003, p = .021) and this moderation effect remained significant (all ps $\leq$ .021) when simultaneously adjusting for daily time spent interacting with the partner, emotional stability, general relationship satisfaction, the presence of children in the

home, and divorce history, as well as when adjusting for the latter four covariates separately. The moderating effect was reduced to marginal significance (p = .058) when only adjusting for daily time spent interacting with the partner (see Tables S7-S12 in the Supplemental Materials).

Similar to the results for emotional reactivity, the overall pattern of results was partially consistent with predictions (see Figure 2). Contrary to expectations, simple slope analyses did not reveal a significant benefit of age among married individuals (indicated by the dotted line; b = -.001, SE = .001, t(278) = -1.185, p = .237, 95% CI [-.003, .001]). However, supporting predictions, age was significantly associated with physical reactivity among dating individuals, such that older dating individuals reported greater increases in their physical health symptoms on days in which they perceived more negative behaviors from their partner compared to younger dating individuals (indicated by the solid line; b = .002, SE = .001, t(278) = 2.000, p = .047, 95% CI [.000, .004]. Additional simple slope analyses indicated that older dating individuals also were more physically reactive to their partner's negative behaviors compared to older married individuals (Age 70; b = .093, SE = .040, t(278) = 2.288, p = .023, 95% CI [.014, .172]). Younger and middle aged dating individuals did not differ from younger and middle aged married individuals in their physical reactivity to relationship tensions (Age 30: b = -.045, SE = .027, t(278) = -1.671, p = .096, 95% CI [-.098, .008]; Age 50: b = .022, SE = .018, t(278) = 1.168, p = .244, 95% CI [-.013, .057]). Again, these results suggest that older dating individuals may be especially vulnerable to experiencing increased physical health problems when faced with relationship tensions.

Results for Relational Reactivity

Lastly, Table 5 presents the results for the model using relationship satisfaction as the daily outcome. As no significant gender differences emerged, all results are presented pooled

across gender. Although individuals reported greater decreases in their daily relationship satisfaction on days in which they perceived their partner as engaging in more negative behaviors (b = -.418, p <.001), neither age (b = .000, p = .833), relationship type (b = -.018, p = .709), nor their interaction (b = -.003, p = .457) moderated this relational reactivity.

Discussion

Although dating in later life has become increasingly common and healthy relationships are vital for older adults' quality of life, the impact of dating on older adults' well-being is not well understood (Carr et al., 2014; Carr & Utz, 2020). Drawing from well-established theories of both aging and relationship development, the current study offers some initial insights into older adults' dating experiences and suggests that establishing a new romantic relationship in later life may come with some costs. The early stages of relationship development are often quite turbulent, as tensions are commonplace and efforts to effectively regulate responses to those tensions can prove particularly difficult (Knobloch et al., 2007; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Unfortunately, and supporting the notion that the benefits typically associated with aging may not be evident in contexts where tensions are hard to avoid (Charles & Piazza, 2009; Skinner et al., 2014), the consequences of this early turbulence for physical and emotional well-being appear heightened for older individuals relative to younger individuals. As predicted, older dating individuals experienced greater increases in their physical health problems on days in which they reported more tension with their partner compared to younger daters. Similarly, older dating women, but not men, experienced greater increases in their emotional distress on days of greater tension compared to their younger dating counterparts. Though this gender difference was unexpected, it is consistent with work suggesting that women often experience greater emotional reactivity to relational conflicts than do men (e.g., Almeida & Kessler, 1998; Bolger et

al., 1989). Notably, these patterns held when adjusting for several potential confounding factors, including daily time spent together, presence of children in the home, neuroticism, general relationship satisfaction, and history of divorce. Together, then, these findings suggest that the normative challenges of navigating a new relationship may become more taxing for individuals' well-being as they grow older.

Interestingly, no significant age differences in dating individuals' relationship satisfaction on higher versus lower tension days were found. This general pattern of findings in which age differences emerged when examining personal, but not relational, well-being aligns with research indicating that older adults' increased sensitivity to unavoidable stressors may result from age-related declines in the ability to adjust to physiological arousal (Charles & Piazza, 2009). As individuals' evaluations of their relationship satisfaction represent a relatively more distal outcome of the immediate physiological experience of the stressful event (e.g., Bloch et al., 2013), age might be less influential for individuals' levels of relational reactivity. Rather, because the early phases of relationship development are a time of greater uncertainty as partners attempt to assess the status and viability of the relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004), most romantic partners, regardless of age, may be reactive to signs of potential relationship problems. Nonetheless, to our knowledge, this is the first study to consider potential age-related differences in relational reactivity to daily tensions, and additional research is needed to replicate and further understand these effects.

Further illuminating the importance of the relational context, older married individuals exhibited lower emotional and physical reactivity to their partner's negative behaviors compared to older dating individuals. However, contrary to expectations, age did not moderate emotional, physical, or relational reactivity to daily relationship tensions among married individuals. At first

blush, these findings stand in contrast to a large literature demonstrating age-related improvements in individuals' responses to negative experiences with close social ties (e.g., Birditt et al., 2005, Birditt et al., 2020). Notably, though, this literature typically examines reactivity to tensions with a wide variety of social partners (e.g., spouse, friend, parent, child, extended family) and a closer examination of this work suggests that the spousal tie may occupy a unique niche in individuals' social networks. For instance, older adults report experiencing more frequent tensions with their spouse than with their other close ties (Birditt et al., 2020). Moreover, tensions with a spouse are more likely to escalate into an argument than are tensions with friends and other family members (Birditt et al., 2005). If older adults experience greater difficulty limiting negative interactions with their spouse relative to their other network members, then the benefits of age may be less robust in the marital context. Indeed, one study provides some initial evidence that age differences in affective reactivity could be weaker for the spousal relationship than for other close ties (Birditt et al. 2020). Thus, an important future direction is to clarify if and why age-related improvements in emotion regulation may vary across different close social ties.

To this end, the current findings introduce the possibility that both 'time lived' and 'time lived in the relationship' are influential in shaping couples' reactivity to relational tensions. Despite the many benefits associated with aging (Charles & Carstensen, 2009), age-related improvements in well-being tend to dissipate in contexts where older adults are less effective in averting negative interactions (Charles & Piazza, 2009; Charles, 2010). As conflict is an inevitable consequence of increased interdependence (Rusbult & VanLange, 2003) and adults involved in ongoing romantic relationships typically name their partner as their closest, most interdependent tie (Zeifman & Hazan, 2008) romantic relationships may represent one such

context. However, older adults' vulnerability to the negative implications of unavoidable tensions appears to be exacerbated in relationships where partners have not had time to develop a strong history of positive experiences as a couple (e.g., Kelly, 1983). These findings, then, not only emphasize the importance of incorporating a lifespan perspective into research on relationship development, but also contribute to a growing literature highlighting the life contexts that may constrain age-related improvements in well-being (Charles & Piazza, 2009; Skinner et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, the implications of the current findings should be evaluated in light of several notable limitations of the study. First and foremost, although the current work was grounded within the well-established literature identifying age-related changes in emotion regulation as a key factor underlying age differences in responses to relational tensions (Carstensen, 2006; Charles, 2010), older and younger daters may nonetheless differ in other ways that might have contributed to the current pattern of results. Given the dearth of empirical studies directly comparing the dating experiences of older and younger individuals, the nature of those differences is not yet clear. One possibility is that older adults may hold different views about dating compared to younger adults. As dating motivations, such as concerns about being alone, are associated with how individuals seek and maintain relationships (e.g., Speilman et al., 2013), understanding potential age differences in these motivations represents an important avenue for future research.

Second, the findings from the current study do not address the potential longitudinal implications of older dating individuals' enhanced reactivity to their partner's daily negative behaviors. Although older dating individuals' emotional and physical well-being may suffer in the moment, it is possible that this reactivity has some long-term advantages. For example, a

heightened sensitivity to relational tensions within dating relationships may mobilize older adults to exit a poor relationship more quickly than would younger adults. Such an effect would be in line with research indicating that older adults are more likely than younger adults to actively prune their social networks of problematic ties to protect their well-being (Carstensen, 2006; Charles & Carstensen, 2009). Thus, additional research on the downstream consequences of reactivity in this context is needed to consider whether what appears to be a vulnerability actually serves as a strength for older dating individuals.

Finally, several aspects of the sample may affect generalizability of the results. Examining potential age differences in both newer and more established relationships required a sample in which all ages (i.e., younger, middle-aged, and older adults) were adequately represented within both relationship types. Thus, we employed a targeted recruitment strategy in which we focused on enrolling couples who were either in the first years of their dating relationship (i.e., the time theorized to be particularly challenging by relational turbulence theory; Knobloch, 2007; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) or who were firmly established in a marital relationship of at least 10 years. To more acutely pinpoint how the relationship context may modify age differences in relational processes, future work may want to consider using larger samples in which relationship length can be examined as continuous. Likewise, though our sample was diverse in terms of age, the couples in the study were primarily white, healthy, and well-educated. Notably, prior work within the aging literature using more representative samples has not found reliable moderation of age differences in emotion regulation by education or race (Charles et al., 2023). Nevertheless, future studies should explore whether the age differences documented in this study may differ within disadvantaged populations. Despite these limitations, the fact that age and relationship type uniquely predicted individuals' reactivity to relational

tensions above and beyond the effects of numerous theoretically relevant covariates even within this conservative sample enhances our confidence in these findings.

Conclusions

Longer life expectancies and rising divorce rates among couples over age 50 have contributed to a new social reality in which dating in later life has become increasingly prevalent (Brown et al., 2018; Brown & Shinohara, 2013). To date, however, our understanding of older adults' experiences within their newly-formed relationships is quite limited. Although the close relationships literature has identified processes that contribute to a happier, healthier relationship, this literature has focused overwhelmingly on young adults (Williamson et al., 2022), leaving questions regarding the generalizability of these findings to an older population. Similarly, although the aging literature has developed influential theories about age-related changes in emotion regulation, applications of these ideas to the romantic domain have focused on older adults in longstanding marriages (e.g., 20+ years; Story et al., 2007; Verstaen et al., 2020) and thus may not extrapolate to newly-formed dating relationships. By bridging the gap between these theoretical perspectives, the current study provides some initial insights into the potential challenges associated with dating during this phase of life.

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